

National Eye Institute

Workforce Plan: FY 2002-2003

DATE: May 29, 2001

TO: Director, OHRM

FROM: Executive Officer, NEI

SUBJECT: NEI Workforce Plan 2002-2003

The mission of the National Eye Institute (NEI) is to conduct and support research, training, health information dissemination, and other programs with respect to blinding eye diseases, visual disorders, mechanisms of visual function, preservation of sight, and the special health problems and requirements of the blind. This mission served as the basis for developing the NEI 2002-2003 Workforce Plan. This plan links the programmatic areas of research emphasis with the staffing needed to successfully accomplish the research goals. The staffing requirements are representative of the priorities of the NEI research initiatives. They reflect direct support for the continued development and enhancement of existing program priorities, as well as for new initiatives in critical areas, such as retinal degenerative diseases, including retinitis pigmentosa, macular degeneration and allied disorders; applications to eye diseases of genetic information derived from the human genome project; communication of vision-related health education and prevention messages to the public and health care professionals; and extramural research program initiatives that include the stimulation of collaborations between scientists in industry, academic and research institutions, and the government.

QUESTION #1: What skills are currently vital to the accomplishment of the agency's goals and objectives?

To accomplish all aspects of our mission critical scientific and programmatic initiatives, the NEI needs to continue to recruit a cadre of highly skilled, scientific and "non-scientific" program support staff. In addition, there is a continued need to train vision scientists in basic science areas of immunology, molecular biology, genetics, and cell biology, as a means of addressing some of the concerns raised in the GAO High Risk Update (GAO-01-263). As part of this overall strategy, we continue to use of our institutional training grant mechanisms for recruiting, nurturing, and training outstanding vision scientists to study the visual systems and its disorders.

In order for researchers to make the most effective use of their expertise in conducting innovative research to meet the goals of the NIH and the NEI, it is critical to employ the "non-scientific" expertise of outstanding personnel to accomplish administrative duties, e.g. travel, recruitment, procurement, etc., in support of the research mission. Both scientific and administrative duties have increased in direct relation to the growth in both our budget and our organizational complexity, as mandated by Congress. This also results in increased scientific staff needs to conduct and administer research and increased staff support needs to ensure proper oversight of grants and to remove administrative tasks that delay or detract from the advancement of major research initiatives. Advances in technology require staffs who constantly strive to improve current systems or develop new ones to enhance the services we provide to our scientists. We need a "non-scientific" workforce that is flexible, a change agent that is willing to develop new skills and take on new assignments to improve the efficiency of the service. In addition, skill enhancement and training in such areas as computerized digital systems are necessary to the keep pace with changes in all areas related to the work of the NEI.

QUESTION #2: What changes are expected in the work of the agency (e.g., due to change in mission/goals, technology, new/terminated programs or functions, and shifts to contracting out)?

A new director of the NEI has been designated and will assume his duties this summer. The NEI will be undergoing a review of its priority-setting and strategic planning processes to assist the director in evaluating the most critical research needs and opportunities in vision research. The review will include research supported within the intramural and extramural research programs of the NEI. The goal of this review will be to develop a more responsive process of performance assessment, programmatic review, initiative development, and priority-setting that will ultimately assist in the development of the long-range research goals and objectives of the institute. This revised process will allow the NEI to

respond more quickly to clinical or technological developments that could be applicable to diseases of the eye or disorders of vision. It will allow shifts in programmatic emphasis when research need or opportunity warrant it.

QUESTION #3: What recruitment, training, and retention strategies are being implemented to help ensure that the agency has, and will continue to have, a high-quality, diverse workforce?

The NIH has been instrumental in developing and implementing creative and effective programs to ease our recruitment and retention issues. The NEI has taken advantage of many of these opportunities to ease our recruitment and retention issues. The use of Title 42 authorities for scientists and the use of T38 pay for physicians, for example, have allowed NIH to compete with universities and outside organizations when recruiting top scientists. The process simplification and flexibilities inherent in those mechanisms have made them extremely useful with regard to recruitment and retention. The use of recruitment and retention incentives up to 25 percent of salary is also a useful tool when confronting the Federal government's limitations regarding our hiring mechanisms.

The NIH also offers flexible workplace programs, such as telecommuting. This can be a very effective recruitment tool to attract candidates that might not otherwise have an interest in NIH, because of travel distance/time. For current employees it offers staff with portable tasks a flexible work environment utilizing digital technology and software-based tools to help facilitate efficient and productive work outside of the tradition work space and provides the option of maintaining a quality work life and family life balance while reducing the stress of commuting and finding parking on the NIH campus.

The NIH loan repayment program has been a great recruitment tool for potential employees, when they learn of the tremendous benefit it can offer. The program has recently been broadened to allow for more employees to participate and has had a significant impact on our recruitment and retention efforts. Likewise, increased delegations of authority that allow managers to make decisions without higher-level involvement, have allowed for greater flexibility in hiring. Delegations have also made a difference in reducing intermediate levels of review and approval, thus cutting down on paperwork.

QUESTION #4: How is the agency addressing expected skill imbalances due to attrition, including retirements over the next five years?

The NEI will review its organizational structure for the "non-scientific" functions within our programs to determine if they are effective and adequately support our mission. An important element in this process is to consider the number and kinds of employees we may lose to retirement. Because retirees may represent the organization's most experienced and knowledgeable employees, we are reviewing data to see what kinds of positions will be affected by a changing workforce. We have identified what skills are critical to our mission and will consider trends in these fields. In some situations, we may find it more advantageous to "contract out" some of our tasks. In other situations, it will be necessary to train and cross-train current employees to use new technologies and to continuously learn new skills and upgrade their current skills to maintain the skill level necessary to meet our goals/mission.

As part of our workforce planning, we hold annual program and personnel reviews with the heads of each component along with management staff to discuss current program priorities and new initiatives in addition to personnel matters within their organizations. We discuss attrition and what plans/recruitment strategies they are considering to replace or re-train current staff. Or how they may reorganize to better utilize the staff they have; provide training opportunities; and in some cases eliminate skills/tasks when necessary.

QUESTION #5: What challenges impede the agency's ability to recruit and retain a high-quality, diverse workforce?

One of our biggest and most challenging issues is pay comparability. How does the NEI compete with outside organizations for not only entry-level positions but top-level positions as well? Pay caps provide artificial barriers to recruiting and retaining experienced personnel. They limit the opportunity to provide continuing career paths for exemplary and highly skilled professionals. The Federal pay scale for entry-level financial personnel is not competitive with private industry. Nor are Federal employment benefits appropriately valued. Another major obstacle we are facing daily is the Federal hiring process. The entire process is outdated and creates enormous delays. Priority placement programs, and other red tape prolong the time between identifying a suitable applicant and actually hiring the person.

Because NIH hires a large number of foreign scientists we work closely with the Fogarty International Center (FIC). The FIC has the responsibility for operational administration of the NIH Visiting Program, which provides opportunities for foreign researchers, exchange scientists, foreign guest researchers/special volunteers and foreign scientists to train and conduct collaborative research at NIH. We rely on FIC to assist us in obtaining various types of VISAs, work permits, etc. Unfortunately, we also experience significant delays in the processing of cases because of unrealistic deadlines and timetables that are imposed by USIA and INS. NIH has also imposed some policies and procedures that could be looked at to determine if changes could be made to expedite or streamline any of its procedures, e.g., NIH may look into the possibility of getting authority from the Department of State to authorize NIH to issue 4th and 5th year J-1 renewals.

QUESTION #6: Where has the agency successfully delegated authority or restructured to reduce the number of layers that programmatic actions passed through before it reaches an authoritative decision point . . .

NIH has allowed the IC's to empower our managers and supervisor's through re-delegation of most personnel authorities, both Title 42 and Title 5. This has led to a simplified process that provides a more flexible and easy-to-use personnel system. For example, our Director has re-delegated personnel authorities to our Scientific Director and Clinical Director, which has allowed for processing procedures to be updated and streamlined and thus removed unnecessary paper reviews has allowed us to increase our processing time by two weeks. (This is consistent with best practices in private industry).

A few years ago after an extensive review of our Information Technology (IT) function, we found it necessary to re-organize and centralize our IT function within the Office of the Director, NEI. It currently serves as the focal point for the Institute on all IT decisions that affect both the intramural and extramural programs. This change has resulted in the overall lower cost per desktop (TCO), a logical interconnectivity via networking and software, secure connectivity, a much higher level of protection from viruses and intruders, a system of management that meets with all federal IT requirements, and better trained technicians and end users. Primarily, we have taken the ever-increasing guess work of continual IT advances out of the hands of the scientists, provided them with a professional level of IT support, and allowed them to concentrate more fully on their science.

QUESTION #7: What barriers (statutory, administrative, physical, or cultural) has the agency identified to achieving workforce restructuring?

Several barriers including space, funding, additional recruitment incentives to attract high quality staff are still prevalent in our attempt to achieve our goals despite increasing gains in many of these areas. Space is currently a serious constraint and should be addressed as a priority since it hinders our ability to develop programmatically and attract outstanding new scientists. Lack of space makes it difficult to introduce state of the art laboratory instrumentation that would allow us to keep pace with new capabilities required with developments and initiatives in research areas. In addition, it is anticipated that as research involving genetically manipulated animals (transgenics, knockouts) continues to develop, expanding the animal holding space for NEI will be of critical importance. It is anticipated laboratory-based (as opposed to facility based) technical personnel will be needed to assist in programmed breeding, maintaining, genotyping and record keeping of gene manipulated mouse colonies.

The technology available to researchers becomes increasingly more sophisticated and complex and requires highly trained personnel. For that reason it is crucial that we retain highly skilled staff on permanent or long-term appointments (GS or Title 42 staff scientists and technicians), which serve as repository of that knowledge and provide continuity to incoming personnel. In addition, access to training resources is required, including the ability to attend classes and invite experts from outside of the NIH that may have specialties in areas we wish to master.

NEI Hiring Plans for FYs 2002/2003

	FY 2002	FY 2003	Total
INTRAMURAL			
Senior Investigators ¹	0	0	0
Investigators ¹	1	2	3
Other MD/PhDs, in FTE positions	7	4	11
Other MD/PhDs in non-FTE positions (IRTA, VF)	15	9	24
Other lab/clinical staff => GS-13	0	0	0
Other lab/clinical staff =< GS-12	7	3	10
Admin/support staff => GS-13	3	5	8
Admin/support staff =< GS-12	8	4	12
Infrastructure support => GS-13	0	0	0
Infrastructure support =< GS-12 ²	0	0	0
Summer and other temps not listed above (include summer IRTAs)	2	1	3
TOTAL INTRAMURAL	43	28	71
EXTRAMURAL			
HSAs/SRAs and other senior level science administrators => GS-13	1	0	1
Other science administration positions =< GS-12	0	0	0
Grants Management and R&D Contract Staff => GS-13 ³	1	0	1
Grants Management and R&D Contract Staff =< GS-12 ³	0	0	0
Administrative and support staff => GS-13	0	0	0
Administrative and support staff =< GS-12	0	1	1
Infrastructure support => GS-13	0	1	1
Infrastructure support =< GS-12 ²	0	0	0
Summer and other temps not listed above	0	0	0
TOTAL EXTRAMURAL	2	2	4
IC TOTAL	45	30	75
¹ Using OIR professional designations			
² Include all wage grade positions related to infrastructure in this group			
³ Includes 1101, 1102, 301 and 303 series where individual is engaged in these activities on a full-time basis.			